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The essays collected here are intentionally provocative. Their shared purpose is to jolt the reader out of some conventional ways of thinking about the relationship between religion and politics. Indeed, even to frame the topic in this way -- as though "religion" and "politics" were distinct entities that happen contingently and externally to be related -- contributes to what we take to be a

pervasive blindness in the scholarly literature. This blindness is not accidental; rather it is a condition of a particular way of understanding the world, which I shall here call a "liberal imaginary." Of particular importance to this imaginary is the distinction between "the religious" and "the secular." One of our aims is to show how this distinction, seemingly so natural and self-evident, is in fact socially constructed and functions ideologically to legitimate certain configurations of power and to delegitimate others, advancing the interests of some at the expense of those of others. To put it differently, we aim to challenge, among other things, the assumption that certain ways of talking about religion, widespread in both the academy and the larger culture, are politically neutral and disinterested. That is not quite the same as challenging the larger political projects these ways of talking subserve, though certainly undermining the sense of "naturalness" with which the liberal discourse of "religion and politics" is imbued can help to clear space for other, more substantive criticisms. But in fact some of the papers collected here actually defend some version of liberalism, and those of us who do criticize liberalism are very far from agreeing with one another as to appropriate fixes or alternatives. Where we agree is that it is time for political theorists, among others, to move beyond naive and ideologically-laden ways of talking about religion.

But that project cannot fail to have important implications for political and ethical theorizing. A primary beneficiary of the distinction between the religious and the secular has historically been the modern state, and debates about the proper "place" of religion in the "public sphere" are also in effect about the liberal state's own legitimacy. Moreover, since one of the functions of the religious-secular

distinction is to lend plausibility to the liberal state's claim to be religiously neutral, deconstructing this distinction helps to make visible the ways that the state itself operates within, rather than above, the conflictual space in which "religion" is said to be located. It is a party to, rather than simply a container for, the conflict. The legal theorist Paul Kahn has noted that "[i]t is an accident of history that the struggle of the state to free itself of the church was framed not as a conflict of faiths but as a conflict over the place of faith in the organization of political power."[1] But in fact it is something more than a mere accident. Within the so-called "secular" political formations that emerged as emblematic of "modernity," the discourse of "religion" functions ideologically as a containment strategy, clearing space for the "rationality" of states and markets.[2] By quarantining "religion," it serves to normalize alternative institutions and ideologies, lending these historically contingent distributions of power an aura of facticity and inevitability. However, Kahn's larger point is that the state too, notwithstanding its claim to secularity, makes constant use of "theological" language: "In a crisis, it remains true today that the secular state does not hesitate to speak of sacrifice, patriotism, nationalism, and homeland in the language of the sacred. The state's territory becomes consecrated ground, its history a sacred duty to maintain, its flag something to die for."[3] This is a dimension of the secular state that liberal theorists have been reluctant to countenance, in part, no doubt, because such an acknowledgement would run counter to the state's own official discourse of self-legitimation. Yet, without this sacral dimension, the state could not make the

[1] Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 23
[2] Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5
[3] Kahn, 23

claims on its citizens that it does -- claims on life itself, which trump any of the individual interests said to motivate the "social contract."

The term Kahn uses to describe his own project of offering a phenomenology of the sacred in relation to the liberal, ostensibly secular nation-state is "political theology." It's a term he borrows from the German theorist Carl Schmitt, whose normative projects (which notoriously included National Socialism) Kahn resolutely rejects, but in whose descriptive claims about the nature of sovereignty and the existential significance of state violence he finds a useful corrective to the liberal emphases on the rule of law, discourse, and universal reason. Political theology, on Kahn's account, aims not to press the claims of "religion" against the demands of a "secular" political order, but rather to reveal this very distinction as part of the conceptual apparatus whereby the liberal state maintains its authority. "The serious claim of political theology today . . . is not that the secular should yield to the church -- whatever church that might be -- but rather that the state is not the secular arrangement that it purports to be."[4]

Sovereignty and "Religion"

State sovereignty is today widely perceived to be under threat of erosion. On the influential interpretation offered by the political theorist Wendy Brown, sovereignty is "migrating" from nation-states to "the very transnational domains of powers that the Peace of Westphalia emerged to contain within or subordinate to nation-states: political economy and religiously legitimated violence."[5] Although

[4] Kahn, 18

[5] Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 23. Brown's use of the term "migration" is interesting. Cavanaugh, following John Bossy, has argued that the "holy" --

Brown is right that neoliberal globalization presents an important challenge to state sovereignty, I'd like to set the stage for the papers that follow by briefly sketching an alternative account of the nation-state's relation to both capital and religion -- a skeptical account that attends more carefully to the ideological and often mystifying functions these various concepts play in political theorizing.

In the first place, although the Westphalian model and its contemporary international institutions, such as the United Nations, purport to treat states as one another's equals, the reality is that rich/powerful states and poor/weak states enjoy "unequal sovereignty."[6] Indeed, since the concept of sovereignty as final authority does not admit of degrees or hierarchical ordering, it is more appropriate to view the conceit of a "flat" geopolitical plane, in which the authority of states is final within their respective territorial boundaries, as a polite (and politically useful) fiction that has never actually been realized in practice. However, because global capital relies on powerful states (for e.g., colonizing new markets; shaping the subjectivities and desires of their citizens; promoting "free trade"; stabilizing currencies; quelling popular uprisings; enforcing patents and copyrights; opening access to natural resources; and a host of other services that presuppose states' authority), it is important to capital that these states be perceived as sovereign.[7]

One of the ways that comparatively powerful states like the United States seek to maintain final authority in a context of waning power is by claiming to be

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that for which people are willing to kill and die -- migrated from church to state. See, e.g., William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11. Brown can be read as suggesting further migrations.

[6] This is one reason why overly abstract, universalizing talk about "the state" can be misleading.

[7] This point was impressed on me by Yi Shen Ma.

able successfully to manage religion. But this requires both the construction of "religion" as a trans-cultural category and its representation as something potentially threatening to a stable social order. Though commonly framed in terms of the early-modern "wars of religion," what William Cavanaugh calls the "myth of religious violence" -- the construction and representation of religion as dangerous and divisive -- is in reality a response to contemporary concerns about (ostensive) state sovereignty and, lurking behind this, the de facto sovereignty of capital. Whereas Brown identifies "God-sanctioned political violence" as one of the chief contemporary threats to state sovereignty, I suggest that such an account -- so ideologically useful for both secular states engaged in foreign occupations and the multi-national corporations that benefit from the creation of new markets and consumers -- should invite suspicion.[8] On the alternative account offered here, "religion" -- a term used to capture and contain those recalcitrant subjectivities that fail to desire above all else the sort of goods on offer in a context of neo-liberal globalization -- becomes a sort of scapegoat, an irrational, potentially violent "other" against which the state can claim moral authority in the face of waning power. What makes "religious violence" incomprehensible, and therefore ideologically useful from the perspective of states, is that the category emerges into focus precisely through the erasure of the larger context of power relations (including colonialism) within which the violence of the disempowered has its sense.

But capital poses a threat to the sovereignty not merely of the state but also of the people. In addition to both undermining the state's power and propping up its

[8] Brown, 23

authority, the encroachment of global capital has the effect of alienating large numbers of people from real political and economic access, even within rich/powerful states. Though comparatively well off materially in relation to much of the world's population, they enjoy only nominal citizenship (and are often severely economically disadvantaged) within their "own" states. As Margaret Somers has argued in relation to the United States, "a large majority" of these "are being compensated for their loss of demos with an alternative identity of ethnos and nationalism, which has propelled them full force into the political culture of the nation." [9] As the state is "transformed into an instrument of market-driven governance," an increasing class of effectively "stateless" citizens is "symbolically 'relocated' into the zone of the nation and its thick identity-endowing patriotic and religious culture of belonging and participation."[10] Religion thus emerges as a source of collective identity and pride at the level of the nation, even as it is viewed as the "other" of (and properly subject, if not yet fully subjugated, to) the state. One result is a vigilantly policed distinction between good religion and bad -- between patriotic religion (whether conservative or liberal theologically) and those forms of religiosity perceived as threatening to the United States.

"Religion" as an Ideological Category

The identification of "religion" as a political problem and focus of increasingly "secularized" political theorizing coincided with the emergence of

[9] Margaret R. Somers, Genealogies *of Citizenship: Markets, Statelessness, and the Right to Have Rights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 119. It is, however, important to note that not all the disenfranchised are so compensated. Others -- particularly those who do not fit prevailing racial, religious, and sexual norms of national belonging -- are sacrificed as scapegoats.
[10] Somers, 133-4

"secular" states in the eighteenth century. Whereas, in the premodern period, the Latin term religio had functioned as a synonym for "piety" or to designate clergy in orders, "religion" in its modern sense is a quasi-sociological category that names a purported domain of life or society that is analytically distinct -- and, under conditions of modernity, socially differentiated -- from other, secular domains, such as the state and the economy.[11] Where the latter are viewed as "public," religion has tended to be viewed as properly private.

For an ostensibly sociological category, "religion" is, however, peculiarly freighted with normative weight: unlike in the case of "culture" or "language," it is difficult to talk about religion without feeling obliged to take up a position, pro or con, with respect to it. In both political theory and popular culture, religion is alternately portrayed as something divisive and dangerous and as something benign and socially beneficial. In the contemporary American context, this ambivalence is reflected in, among other things, conventional interpretations of the First Amendment's religion clauses. On the one hand, religion is viewed as something potentially threatening to just and stable governance. On the other hand, as Michael Sandel has noted, "The case for according special protection to the free exercise of religion presupposes that religious belief, as characteristically practiced in a particular society, produces ways of being and acting that are worthy of honor and appreciation -- either because they are admirable in themselves or because they

[11] For a helpful overview of the term's history, see Cavanaugh, 60ff.

foster qualities of character that make good citizens."[12] Religion is both the problem that the liberal secular state is meant to solve and the putative source of the civic virtues necessary for solving it.

These differing ways of "imagining religion" are not simply the result of the fact that some Americans are sympathetic to religion and others are not (though that is true); nor can they be explained by the commonplace that religion can be "used" for both good and ill (or the alternative theory that there are good and bad religions). Rather, what accounts for religion's Janus face is that the category is called upon to perform two substantially different, but nonetheless related, ideological tasks: (a) that of serving as the conceptual boundary -- the constitutive "outside" -- of the "secular" state and (b) that of underwriting American national identity. The sometimes incompatible demands made on "religion" within prevailing American civic imaginaries give rise to a conception of religion that is fractured and unstable, which in turn fuels perennial controversy over religion's "place" in society.

Whither Liberalism?

The essays that follow were all written by students of mine at Claremont School of Theology and Claremont Graduate University. Rather than collectively advancing a unified position, they should be read as strategic interventions, sometimes working at cross-purposes to one another, in a larger debate about the future of liberal political theory. Critically engaging a wide-range of thinkers -- from Benedict Anderson to Slavoj Žižek-- they offer fresh perspectives on classic

[12] Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* 2d ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xiii-xiv

questions about the relation between theology and the state; religion and the nation; pluralism and politics.

The preeminent twentieth-century philosophical defender of liberalism was the late John Rawls. Daniel Ambord's essay begins by placing Rawls's conception of political liberalism in the larger context of ongoing philosophical debates about pluralism. Though sympathetic to Rawls's concern with political oppression, Ambord is skeptical of political liberalism's ability successfully to provide a neutral space for uncoerced discourse: the "secularity" characteristic of Rawlsian "public reason" invariably infects the various comprehensive doctrines with which it comes in contact. Yet, Ambord does not view this as necessarily a bad thing. Through a reciprocal "self-weakening" of both liberalism and the various comprehensive traditions among which it seeks to mediate, such encounters may give rise, on the one hand, to a comparatively safe, if admittedly non-neutral, space for difference and, on the other, to imaginative reinterpretations of various traditions, "religious" and otherwise, that allow for a new appreciation of historical contingency.

Whereas some political theorists and sociologists, seeking to resist what they see as the allure of politically unrealistic forms of liberal cosmopolitanism, have argued that nations provide the non-democratic solidarities on which democracy depends, Yi Shen Ma argues that nationhood is hardly the only basis for democratic engagement. Moreover, national identities are often exclusionary and hegemonic, shaped by the interests of the powerful. Bringing Homi Bhabha's emphasis on the performative aspects of nationalist narratives into conversation with William Connolly's criticisms of "territorial unitarianism," Ma challenges the concept of a

single "imagined community," arguing that a democratic ethos can be cultivated through an appreciation of overlapping networks of belonging. On his account, it is not shared nationhood, but engagement among differing, often competing constituencies, that provides the basis on which democracy can most effectively be sustained. However, because nations are commonly conjured in order to legitimate political boundaries that are democratically arbitrary, Ma points out that reconstituting democracy on the basis of trans- and sub-national solidarities cannot fail to involve a challenge to the legitimacy of states. Cutting through the false dichotomy between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, Ma calls for "the development of new democratic institutions that transcend the narrow confines of the nation-state and its theology of sovereignty."

Ann Hidalgo explores both the way that contemporary states seek to defend their claims to sovereignty performatively by building walls and the way that these claims have been challenged performatively by graffiti artists. Following Wendy Brown, Hidalgo argues that border walls, such as that between the United States and Mexico, though ineffective at deterring movement, perform a theatrical function of displaying sovereign power by creating enclosures for the political sacred. However, by highlighting vulnerabilities, walls simultaneously undercut the very aura of sacral political authority they seek to project. Like jetties along a coastline, walls can contribute to the erosion of what they seek to safeguard. Moreover, as material surfaces for protest art, "the walls themselves create a space for the very critique that would see them torn down." Hidalgo argues that, by engaging the walls'

theatrical dimension, artists like Banksy and Ron English have been able, with varying degrees of success, to chip away at the intended aura of state sovereignty.

Stephen Padilla's essay approaches the distinction between insiders and outsiders from a different angle. Whereas Kahn, following Schmitt, emphasizes the existential exercise of will as a key element in sovereignty -- an element that liberalism, with its emphasis on an unbroken rule of law, tends to overlook or downplay -- Padilla follows Bonnie Honig in resisting an overly rigid distinction between norm and decision. Like Bhabha, Honig emphasizes "plural timelines" that allow for the continual making, unmaking, and remaking of "the people" within a democracy. On Padilla's reading, such a "politics of becoming" enables political theory to recover the perspectives of those outside the dominant imaginary, including the state's non-consenting sacrificial victims. Turning to the theology of Schmitt's contemporary Paul Tillich, Padilla seeks to open "space for a theology of the political that stands in contradistinction to the exercise of authority and judgment, and seeks instead the divine in human affairs when the symbolic ordering of things loses its meaning."

Honig's politics of becoming can be understood as embracing, rather than attempting to resolve, an apparent paradox -- namely, that the law that creates and regulates the demos is a product of the people themselves. Whereas Rousseau sought to interrupt this seeming circularity by positing a primordial lawgiver, and Schmitt emphasized the importance of a sovereign, who upholds the law by deciding on the exception, Honig seeks to preserve the tension between law and people as a dialectical cycle generative of novelty. Aligning herself with Franz Rosenzweig

against Schmitt's secularized Christian political theology, Honig reclaims an active role for the people in the exceptional circumstances that, on Schmitt's account, require sovereign decisions. In his essay, however, Shane Akerman argues that, in granting "the people" interpretive authority over both "the law" and "the exception," Honig ends up collapsing the supposedly generative paradox of political legitimation into an alternative foundationalism -- one that privileges one horn of the dilemma over the other, without satisfactorily explaining what grounds the authority of the people themselves. On Akerman's reading, Honig is unable to escape the problem of origins because she treats political concepts as merely analogous to theological ones. By contrast, Akerman argues that grounding democracy requires something more radical -- namely, an appeal to God as more than "a mere metaphor for sovereignty." In place of political theology, as Schmitt conceived it, Akerman proposes a "theological politics," understood as "a political response to explicitly theological claims," which he develops in a Marxist-Christian direction.

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